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Citation for published version:

Joseph, J 2016, 'Saussure's value(s)', *Recherches sémiotiques/Semiotic Inquiry*, vol. 34, no. 1-2-3, pp. 191-208. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1037153ar>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.7202/1037153ar](https://doi.org/10.7202/1037153ar)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Recherches sémiotiques/Semiotic Inquiry

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SAUSSURE'S VALUE(S)

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Abstract

Valeur, value, is central to how languages are conceived in the *Cours de linguistique générale*, and it has been an integral part of Saussure's intellectual legacy. This paper investigates the background to his conception of value, focussing particularly on the work of Henri Dameth, as there is evidence suggesting that Saussure attended Dameth's lectures on political economics while a student at the University of Geneva. Several parallels are noted between the treatment of value in Dameth's work and in the *Cours*. The paper also examines the role of value in Saussure's writings prior to his lectures on general linguistics, as well as the links between the *Cours* and the work of Saussure's brother, René, on an international currency, in conjunction with his role in the Esperanto movement.

Résumé

La *valeur* est au centre de la conception de la langue dans le *Cours de linguistique générale*, et plus généralement de l'héritage intellectuel de Ferdinand de Saussure. Dans cet article il s'agit de la pré-histoire de sa conception de valeur, visant particulièrement le travail d'Henri Dameth, qui donnait le cours d'économie politique dans la Faculté de Droit de l'Université de Genève au moment où nous savons que Saussure suivait des cours dans cette Faculté. On remarque plusieurs points de contact entre la valeur dans la pensée de Dameth et dans le *Cours de linguistique générale*. Cet article examine aussi comment la valeur figure dans les écrits de Saussure avant ses leçons de linguistique générale, et les liens entre le *Cours* et les efforts de René de Saussure, frère cadet de Ferdinand, pour établir une monnaie internationale, en conjonction avec son rôle dans le mouvement espérantiste.

1 Value, history, biography

Valeur, value, is central to how languages are conceived in the *Cours de linguistique générale* (Saussure 1916). A language is a collection of signs, each the conjunction of a mental concept, the signified, with a mental sound pattern or sound-image, the signifier. The term 'sound-image' is deceptive, though, because a signifier is not really an image, but a value. The same is true of a signified, and here again it is easy to be led astray when the *Cours* tries to make the signified comprehensible by representing it with both «*arbre*» and a drawing of a tree (Saussure 1916: 101 [²1922: 99]; see further Joseph 2016):



The values that signifiers and signifieds consist of are nothing other than their difference from all the other signifiers and signifieds in the language system. How do you depict *that*?

This modernist way of conceiving of a language was strikingly original to those who heard Saussure's lectures on general linguistics in Geneva from 1907 to 1911, and to the hundreds, and eventually millions, who read the *Cours*, a book posthumously assembled from his lectures and published one hundred years ago. It set linguistics on a new path, to be followed in time by ethnography, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, literary and cultural studies, sociology and other disciplines in which structuralism had an impact. Yet these

concepts of sign and value were far from new. They had figured in Saussure's own education, before being abandoned as *passé*, and then forgotten.

The references to value in the *Cours* begin with Part I, Chapter III, which introduces the static and the evolutive in linguistics. This dual perspective can be ignored in most fields, Saussure says, but "impose themselves imperiously on the economic sciences" (Saussure 1916: 117 [²1922: 114-115]),¹ where political and historical economics are sharply distinguished. Linguistics must do the same, because "as in political economics, we face the notion of *value*; both sciences deal with a *system of equivalence between things of different orders*: in one, a job and a salary; in the other, a signified and a signifier" (1916: 118 [²1922: 115]).² Signifier and signified had been introduced two chapters earlier, but the concept of value is saved until now, being bound up so tightly with the historical. A respected Tolstoy scholar has recently written that

Eighteen fifty-nine [...] saw the publication of two books that defined the later course of European intellectual history: Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and Karl Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Both authors revolutionized their fields of study by historicizing them. The current state of biological species, or of socio-economic formations, was for Darwin and Marx not only a product of the historical process, but also a representation of that process. Scientific research was supposed not only to be able to explain natural or social phenomena by their history, but also to reconstruct the whole of history from their current, observable state. (Zorin 2015: 15)

Darwin and Marx revolutionized their fields, certainly, but biology and political economics were already profoundly historicized well before 1859. Nothing said here about Darwin fails to apply to predecessors such as Chambers or even Lamarck. But Zorin's claim about socio-economic formations being a representation of the historical process that produced them is insightful. Marx made that clearer than had Ricardo or Adam Smith. And Darwin and Marx succeeded in spreading these ideas further than anyone before them – so much so that the very names 'Darwin' and 'Marx' have become representations of a historical process that produced them and that they embody.

Saussure too revolutionized his field, not by historicizing it or indeed de-historicizing it, despite frequent claims to that effect. He *re*-historicized it in such a way that, adapting what Zorin says, the current state of a linguistic system is not only a product of the historical process, but also a representation of that process. Not 'historical' in either the sense of the linguists of Saussure's time, or the Marxist sense. One of the axes ground by Voloshinov (1929) in his critique of Saussure was his failure to see or admit that every linguistic sign contains the class struggle within it. Saussure's Genevese Calvinist upbringing would indeed make him dubious about social 'class', and more inclined to reimagine history as diachrony, the bloodless comparison of the values of two language systems existing at different times.

You will have noticed me slipping in a biographical value. The passage cited from Zorin continues:

What is more, both Darwin and Marx presented their books to the reader not only as scientific discoveries, but as an important stage in their personal biographies. In the same manner Tolstoy was attempting a total explanation of the current state of Russia that had to be at one and the same time a panoramic historical reconstruction and an intellectual autobiography. (Zorin 2015: 15)

¹"Au contraire la dualité dont nous parlons s'impose déjà impérieusement aux sciences économiques". The translation is mine, as are those that follow – the published translations not always being sufficiently literal for purposes of close historical reading.

² "comme en économie politique, on est en face de la notion de *valeur* ; dans les deux sciences, il s'agit d'un *système d'équivalences* [1922: *équivalence*] *entre des choses d'ordres différents* : dans l'une un travail et un salaire ; dans l'autre, un signifié et un signifiant".

None of this is true of Saussure. He did not even present his revolutionary book to readers, let alone include any overt autobiography. If though we apply to authors what Zorin has said about the works of 1859, the point of biography is to understand the person as “not only a product of the historical process, but also a representation of that process”.³ That is as much a Saussurean way toward understanding as it is a Darwinian, Marxist or Tolstovian one.

2 *Valeur* in Saussure’s youthful education

Between his secondary education at the Collège de Genève and his university studies Saussure attended the Gymnase de Genève, which was located in the buildings of the Université de Genève, and where the teachers were men who also taught at the Collège or Université or both (for details see Joseph 2012). The course given by the director of the Gymnase, Isaac-Antoine Verchère (1827-1916), may have had the most enduring impact on Saussure. One of his classmates wrote in his memoirs that Verchère “gave us an enjoyable logic course of extreme simplicity” (Lemaître [1922]: 36);⁴ another recalled that “I did not understand very much of it; the subject of his course was, I think, psychology” (David 2004: 110).⁵ In fact the course was a comprehensive survey of philosophy from ancient to modern times, and it did cover psychology as well. It is interesting that Lemaître remembered it as a course in Logic, which was one of the main subdivisions and which included the section on language. The course notes taken by Alexandre Claparède open:

One of the great apanages of the human species is the ability to communicate intellectually. These communications are carried out by different means which generally take the name of *language* [langage]. The material processes are called *signs*. But if one gives a sign to an absent person it no longer has any value. Every time a collection of conventional or natural signs is made, this is called a language [langage]. There are several systems of signs: thus the sounds of the voice or *speech* [parole], which is language *par excellence* (*la langue*) (παράβολα [parabola], comparison, then language [langage]. (Claparède 1876, f. 426)⁶

Notes from a similar course that Saussure took as a University student, given by Henri-Frédéric Amiel (1821-1881), now remembered for his *Journal intime*,⁷ likewise contain material on sign theory that links back to Amiel’s and Verchère’s own education of half a century earlier. Then the 17th-century *grammaire générale* tradition was still the core of Genevese education, unlike in France, where it had not survived Napoleonic reforms. It is striking how many of the terms we associate with Saussure are present in this paragraph from

³ To say this is to raise the spectre of the ‘biographical fallacy’, a term that originated with the New Critics in the U.S. but with close links to I. A. Richards and T. S. Eliot in Britain. Perhaps it is a dead concept, hence I say ‘raise the spectre’, yet a still widespread spectre it remains. If some analysts in the past offered interpretations of texts based on the facts of their author’s life and held such interpretations to be authoritative to the point of being impervious to criticism, and if a reaction against that was inevitable, the pendulum swung too far. It is irrational to deny that facts about an author’s life might shed light on aspects of the texts he produced. Darwin, Marx and Tolstoy were among those of us who think they may actually be essential.

⁴ “Notre professeur de philosophie, M. Verchère, nous donnait un agréable cours de logique d’une extrême simplicité”.

⁵ “Verchère enseignait la philosophie, à laquelle je ne comprenais pas grand-chose ; la matière de son cours était, je crois, la psychologie”.

⁶ “Un des grands appanages de l’espèce humaine c’est de pouvoir communiquer intellectuellement. Ces communications se font par différents moyens qui portent généralement le nom de langage. Les procédés matériels s’appellent signes. Mais si on fait un signe à une personne absente il n’a plus de valeur. Toutes les fois qu’on fait une collection de signes conventionnels ou naturels, cela s’appelle un langage. Il y a plusieurs systèmes de signes: ainsi les sons de la voix ou parole, c’est le langage par excellence (*la langue*). (παράβολα, comparaison, puis langage)”.

⁷ Amiel’s *Journal intime* was initially published in two volumes in 1882 and 1884.

Verchère: *langage, signe, langue, parole* and, of course, *valeur*. These terms were part of the academic air that Saussure grew up breathing; and when he began to lecture on general linguistics in 1907 he may have been unaware that his students had grown up in a changed atmosphere. Saussure was in the one of the very last cohorts to be taught by these men of his grandparents' generation.

But the terms do not have the same *value* in Verchère's use of them as they will in Saussure's. He redefined every one of them, making them into a system, where the value of each depends on its relation to the others. How did he come to conceive of them in this new way? Saussure mentions *économie politique* in his lectures on general linguistics, and many have speculated about economic theorists who may have influenced him. He never cites any. But the journal kept by one of his friends during their time as a student in the University of Geneva records that "De Saussure is taking an impossible load of courses, a bit of everything, theology, law, sciences; he's taking second-year courses where he understands nothing, since he didn't take the first year. In short, he's doing it as only he can" (Pictet 1875).⁸

The Faculté de Droit had a course on political economy, taught by Henri Dameth (1812-1884), formerly a teacher in the prestigious Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris, until his Fourierist affiliations got him into trouble with the administration of Napoleon III (Busino & Stelling-Michaud 1965: 16). Dameth's *Introduction à l'étude de l'économie politique* was published in 1865, with a second edition in 1878, just three years after Saussure was attending lectures in his Faculty. It consists of a set of lectures, bound to be close, if not identical, to his university lectures. This is the nearest we have to a documented source for Saussure's comments on economics, and such is the oblivion into which Dameth has fallen that it has never previously been explored.

Dameth's lectures open with some negative things he hears repeated about political economics and wants to disprove: that political economics is just socialism in disguise, or is British propaganda for free trade; that it is not and cannot be a science (Dameth 1865: 3-4 [1878: 4]). This leads him to ask in his second lecture:

So, has political economics discovered the great generating fact that plays such a decisive role in constituting a science? – Yes, it is the notion of *value*. To such a degree that a good many economists today propose defining political economics as *the science of value*. (Dameth 1865: 24 [1878: 30])⁹

Saussure too will confront the question of whether linguistics is a science, and will argue that it is a science of values. Other points of intersection appear a page later in Dameth:

There are however certain functions so directly social in nature, or that preside so directly over the movement of exchanges in society, that the technology of these functions could not be understood without the illumination of economic science. Such are: commerce, taken in its nature and in its organization into a whole; money, considered both as instrument of exchanges and as means of capitalization; credit, etc. For industries of this order, it is not enough for the economist to study them *from without*; he must penetrate within, analyse their mechanism, figure out their technology, at least at the theoretical and general level. (Dameth 1865: 25 [1878: 32])¹⁰

⁸ "De Saussure prend un tas de cours impossible, un peu de tout, il est autant en Théologie qu'en Droit, qu'en Sciences ; il prend des cours de 2^{ème} année où il ne comprend rien, vu que la 1^{ère} lui manque. Bref, il fait cela à sa manière lui".

⁹ "Enfin, l'économie politique a-t-elle découvert ce grand fait générateur qui joue un rôle si décisif dans la constitution d'une science? – Oui, c'est la notion de la *valeur*. A telles enseignes que bon nombre d'économistes proposent aujourd'hui de définir l'économie politique la *science de la valeur*".

¹⁰ "Il est toutefois certaines fonctions d'un caractère si directement social, ou qui président d'une manière si expresse au mouvement des échanges dans la société, que la technologie de ces fonctions ne saurait être bien comprise sans les lumières de la science économique. Telles sont : le commerce, pris dans sa nature et dans son

What distinguishes a science, especially one with a deeply social dimension, is the analysis from within. Saussure will insist on the need to study a language “in its organization into a whole”, and not *from without* – what he calls the external view. Just as Dameth says of the economist, for Saussure the linguist seeking to understand how languages work “must penetrate within, analyse their mechanism”. Saussure insists on the social nature of language, and when he explains what he means by this it is, as for Dameth, a vision of society as the conglomeration of individuals, each of whom represents the whole society in microcosm. “General interests are satisfied, in sum, by satisfying individual interests. Society is a rational being, of which the individual members form the concrete reality” (Dameth 1865: 27 [1878: 35]).¹¹ If Saussure never describes society as “a rational being”, his occasional references to Durkheim’s “conscience collective” suggest that he would not have rejected the characterization (see Joseph 2000; 2012: 508, 586-587, 595).

When Dameth comes to explain *prix*, he again does so in terms that will have echoes in Saussure’s discussion in the *Cours*:

A rather intense degree of observation is needed to comprehend: (1) that price is only the monetary expression of the value of goods; (2) that, in the formation of price, money only plays the role of a term of comparison between goods; (3) that the value of the money itself depends on the ratio of the quantity of it available relative to the quantity of goods for which it serves as the means of exchange. (Dameth 1865: 41)¹²

Goods have a value, expressible in money, which is only a term of comparison – of difference – between goods. Recall that Verchère, in his course, pointed out that the word *parole* derives from Greek *parabola*, comparison. At the same time, money itself has a value which depends on how much of it is available relative to the supply of goods. But what determines the value of particular goods?

Dameth says that economists recognise a “natural” or “real” value of goods, which represents their total cost of production, including such things as raw materials, interest on capital, workers’ salaries, taxes and transportation. There we have, indeed, value as representation of the process of production. This Dameth says gives the “essence” of the price of the goods; but not their market price. That follows the law of supply and demand, which “oscillates incessantly around the *natural price* and sometimes even strays distantly from it” (Dameth 1865: 41 [1878: 52]).¹³ The *Cours* recalls this relationship: “through one of its sides a value is rooted in things and their natural relations (as is the case in economic science – for example the value of a plot of land is proportional to what it brings in”

organisation d’ensemble; la monnaie, considérée tant comme instrument des échanges que comme moyen de capitalisation; le crédit, etc. Pour les industries de cet ordre, il ne suffit pas que l’économiste les étudie *du dehors*; il doit pénétrer au dedans, analyser leur mécanisme, raisonner leur technologie, tout au moins théorique et générale”. The 1st ed. has a comma rather than a colon after “Telles sont”.

¹¹ “La satisfaction de l’intérêt général se résout, en somme, dans celle des intérêts particuliers. La société est un être de raison, dont les particuliers forment la réalité substantielle”.

¹² “[I]l faut un degré d’observation déjà assez intense pour comprendre: 1° que le prix n’est que l’expression monétaire de la valeur des marchandises; 2° que la monnaie ne joue, dans la formation du prix, que le rôle d’un terme de comparaison des marchandises entre elles; 3° que la valeur de l’argent lui-même dépend de son rapport de quantité présente avec celle des marchandises auxquelles il sert de moyen d’échange”. In the 1878 edition this passage appears with revisions to the first two points which I here indicate in italics: “1° que le prix n’est que l’expression monétaire, *c’est-à-dire celle du rapport de valeur de l’argent avec la valeur des marchandises*; 2° que, *par conséquent*, la monnaie ne joue, dans la formation du prix, que le rôle d’un *moyen de détermination de la valeur comparative* des marchandises entre elles” (p. 52: “(1) that price is only the monetary expression, *that is the expression of the value relationship of money with the value of goods*; (2) that, *consequently*, in the formation of price, money only plays the role of a *means of determining the comparative value* of goods vis-à-vis one another”).

¹³ “oscille incessamment autour du prix *naturel* et s’en éloigne même parfois beaucoup”.

(Saussure 1916: 119 [²1922: 116]).¹⁴ But it then denies that this applies in the case of language, where there is no such natural basis, all being instead completely arbitrary. The system of a language is so complex that it is impossible to study simultaneously the two axes which the *Cours* at this point christens synchronic and diachronic. They must, it says, be analysed in sequence.

Returning to Dameth: he gives a potted history of the idea of value, an idea to which, he says, each generation of economists have added their bit (1865: 77 [²1878: 95]). First there was the mistaken identification of value with price. This the economists replaced with another concept, equating value with utility. This was progress, as it made value “internal, inherent to the object bought and sold” (ibid.) –¹⁵ but only by shifting the burden of definition from “What is value?” to “What is utility?”. The answer to the second question is that utility is a relationship imposed by nature between a consumable good and the need we have of it. That put man in a secondary role to nature, Dameth says, and with serious political consequences: for if value is based on natural utility, then anyone would have the right to usurp the ownership of what has not been produced by his own work. Moreover, nothing is more valuable to man than air or light, and yet because the supply of these is not limited, they have no ‘value’ in the economic sense. They are not “*appropriable* and *exchangeable*” (1865: 75 [²1878: 93]).¹⁶ The utility-based concept of value fails to take supply and demand into account.

The next historic step was to place the origin of value in human work: this Dameth (1865: 80 [²1878: 99]) attributes to Adam Smith. He admires this view for putting man back in his proper place, and for introducing the distinction between “*usage* value and *exchange* value” (ibid.),¹⁷ which was a necessary bridge out of pure utility. Ultimately though, the value of usage is individually based; it might apply to Robinson Crusoe on his island, but not to value in society. “The moment we leave this novelistic fiction, in order to reason about society, usage value too disappears, absorbed by exchange value” (1865: 81 [²1878: 100]).¹⁸ And he says the British school made a grave error with regard to the “conditions of materiality and duration”, failing to give “pure labours of the mind” any part in the formation of value (ibid.).¹⁹ This again is reminiscent of what Saussure will say about linguistic value: that it is about form, not content. The linguistic sign is the conjunction of two mental entities, the signifier and the signified, each a value generated by difference, with no positive content.

Dameth reduces his principle to a formula: “Value is the power of exchange that services possess relative to one another” (1865: 85 [²1878: 105-106]).²⁰ He adds that “the chief meaning of this notion is that to man alone belongs the creation of value; that in reality he neither sells nor buys nor exchanges anything other than this, and that consequently he

¹⁴ “par un de ses côtés une valeur a sa racine dans les choses et leurs rapports naturels (comme c’est le cas dans la science économique – par exemple un fonds de terre vaut en proportion de ce qu’il rapporte)”.

¹⁵ “interne, inhérent à l’objet qui se vend et s’achète”.

¹⁶ “*appropriable* et *échangeable*”.

¹⁷ “la valeur d’*usage* et la valeur d’*échange*”.

¹⁸ “Dès que nous sortons de cette fiction de roman, pour raisonner sur la société, la valeur d’usage disparaît à son tour, absorbée par la valeur d’échange”.

¹⁹ “conditions de matérialité et de durée”, “les labeurs purs de l’esprit”.

²⁰ Cited from the 1878 edition, which has a couple of punctuation corrections. Dameth presents his formula as a restatement of one given earlier by Frédéric Bastiat (1801-1850). “Voici la formule donnée par F. Bastiat : « *La valeur est le rapport entre des services échangés.* » On peut l’exprimer de cette autre façon : La valeur est la puissance relative d’échange que possèdent les services entre eux (“Here is the formula given by F. Bastiat: ‘*Value is the relationship between exchanged services*’. It can be expressed in this other way: Value is the power of exchange that services possess relative to one another”).

cannot be reproached for illegitimately appropriating the free gifts of nature” (ibid.).²¹ So private property is legitimate, including land or other free gifts of nature, since what is owned – what can be bought, sold or exchanged – is *value alone*, and that is a human creation. “So conceived”, Dameth writes, “the economic world appears to us as a vast market in which services are exchanged for services” (ibid.).²² When the *Cours* revisits value at greater length, it takes this exchange-based approach, which helps us understand what Saussure meant in repeatedly calling a language a “social fact”.

Even outside language, all values [...] are always constituted:

(1) by a *dissimilar* thing susceptible to being *exchanged* for something of which the value is to be determined;

(2) by *similar* things that can be *compared* with the one whose value is in question.

[...] Hence for a five-franc piece, one needs to know: (1) that it can be exchanged for a determinate quantity of something different, for example bread; (2) that it can be compared with a similar value of the same system (a dollar, etc.). Likewise a word can be exchanged for something dissimilar: an idea; moreover, it can be compared with something of the same nature: another word. (Saussure 1916: 165-166 [²1922: 159-160])²³

This is one of those instances where the *Cours*, for ease of exposition, keeps the vernacular terms word and idea, which it elsewhere replaces with signifier and signified. The price of the terms’ familiarity, what it is exchanged for, is some clarity: when the example is introduced of *mouton* having a different value from *sheep*, because *mouton* refers both to the animal on the hoof and to its meat, whereas English distinguishes *sheep* from *mutton* (Saussure 1916: 166 [²1922: 160]), we are in the familiar discursive world of names for things, just what Saussure insists we should resist (1916: 99-100 [²1922: 97-98]). He wants us to accept that the signifieds corresponding to these French and English words differ exactly as the signifiers do. They too are not objects, but values, linguistic values created through difference.

That is where the economic sense of value ceases to be a helpful metaphor, since economics is concerned with objects as well as concepts. When Dameth uses what will be the key Saussurean term *signe*, it is in association with paper money, something of which, like many in his time, he was distrustful. He distinguishes between *papier de circulation*, such as banknotes, which carry a monetary value, and *papier de gage*, contracts, mortgages and so on that are subject to the fluctuations of the *prix courant*, making them more akin to goods (Dameth 1865: 243 [²1878: 298-300]). He is not opposed to *papier de circulation* – it would be surprising if he were, given his belief that value is the relative power of exchange of services – only worried because banknotes are commonly misunderstood as *being* value, rather than a sign of it, a promise to pay, which is to say a speech act.

Whereas the *Cours* first introduced value in the context of synchrony and diachrony, this second, longer treatment occurs in conjunction with the question of what is ‘identity’ and ‘reality’ in language. Here we get the example of a chess piece: if a knight gets eaten by the

²¹ “le sens capital de cette notion, c’est qu’à l’homme seul appartient la création de la valeur ; qu’il ne vend et n’achète ou n’échange en réalité que cela, et qu’on ne peut pas lui reprocher, par conséquent, l’illégitime appropriation des dons gratuits de la nature”.

²² “Ainsi conçu, le monde économique nous apparaît comme un vaste marché où des services s’échangent contre des services”.

²³ “[M]ême en dehors de la langue, toutes les valeurs [...] sont toujours constituées : 1° par une chose *dissemblable* susceptible d’être *échangée* contre celle dont la valeur est à déterminer ; 2° par les choses *similaires* qu’on peut *comparer* avec celle dont la valeur est en cause. [...] Ainsi pour déterminer ce que vaut une pièce de cinq francs, il faut savoir : 1° qu’on peut l’échanger contre une quantité déterminée d’une chose différente, par exemple du pain ; 2° qu’on peut la comparer avec une valeur similaire du même système, par exemple une pièce d’un franc, ou avec une monnaie d’un autre système ([1916:] une livre sterling, etc. [1922:] un dollar, etc.). De même un mot peut être échangé contre quelque chose de dissemblable : une idée ; en outre, il peut être comparé avec quelque chose de même nature : un autre mot”.

family dog, you can replace it with any other piece that you declare to be of the same value, making it identical (Saussure 1916: 158-159 [²1922: 153-154]). The value of the knight is the particular configuration of moves it can make, not the physical shape of the piece. In another sense, the value of the knight changes depending on what other pieces are left on the board at a particular point in the match.

That is the synchronic ‘reality’, perhaps – though whenever Saussure talks about linguistic reality he makes a point of grounding it in how ordinary speakers think, as opposed to the ‘abstract’ analyses of linguists. This is a position associated with the Scottish ‘common sense’ philosophy, which held that something is more likely to be true if it is evident to everyone. The shared Scottish-Genevese Calvinist heritage is significant. The very word *Presbyterian*, through its opposition with *Papist* and *Episcopalian*, signifies the refusal of hierarchy. Note Saussure’s choice of chessman: not the bishop, but the knight, the first piece outside the regal or ecclesiastical hierarchy. For Calvinists, everyone is inherently equal before God, endowed with the same sensory apparatus and capacity for intelligence – in theory, anyway. And the people are the judge of what the language is, not the poets or the linguists. Even the language system itself is imagined by Saussure in a Calvinist way, with all elements inherently equal, none better or worse, none more or less important, their value deriving simply from their difference from the other elements in the system.

3 *Valeur* in Saussure’s early writings

Already in one his first articles, read to the Société de Linguistique de Paris in 1876, when he was 18, Saussure wrote about the value of a sound in a way quite in line with his mature theory. “The character of this *a* in Sanskrit is entirely negative: it never weakens to *i* or *u*” (Saussure 1877: 362 [1922: 382]).²⁴ The “character” is the value, and the “entirely” is meant literally – the vowel’s sound, which may have been [a], [æ], even [e], does not determine its nature, which lies instead in what it *does not do*. That readiness to locate linguistic value in the negative character of an element is what is distinctively Saussurean. The word *valeur* appears in the article, which also speaks of there being no “exchange” between particular pairs of vowels (1877: 364 [1922: 384]).

This way of conceiving of the language system is fully developed in his first book, published shortly after his 21st birthday (Saussure 1879). Here instances of *valeur* abound. Saussure sent a copy to his maternal grandfather, followed by a letter in which he tried to explain the gist of the book, essentially that the Indo-European mother language had just a single vowel, which he indicates as *a* although he argues that it was pronounced as [e], then split into /e/ and /o/. Other vowels developed out of ‘sonant coefficients’ that followed the single vowel, sounds such as /n/, /r/ and /j/ that could function as consonants or vowels depending on where they occurred. His grandfather replied:

What is unclear to me is whether these vowel consonants of the primitive language played their role as vowels phonically like the Bohemian *ř* or whether you are supposing a primitive writing system and a simple theoretical value attributed to the said consonant vowels. But in the latter case we would know something of the history of the primitive people and it is evident that you mean a phonetic value. (Pourtales 1879, f. 187v.)²⁵

²⁴ “Le caractère de cet *a* en indo-européen est tout négatif: il ne s’affaiblit jamais en *i* ou en *u*”.

²⁵ “Ce que je ne tire pas au clair, c’est si ces consonnes voyelles de la langue primitive jouaient leur rôle de voyelles phoniquement comme l’*ř* en bohème ou si tu supposes un écriture primitive et une simple valeur théorique attribuée aux dites voyelles consonnes. Mais en ce dernier cas on saurait quelque chose de l’histoire du peuple primitif et il est évident que tu entends une valeur phonétique”.

The suggestion that the *Mémoire* was implying the existence of writing during the prehistoric period shows how confusing the book was even to its most sympathetic readers. But no less remarkable is the grandfather's astuteness in recognising that the sonant coefficients represent "a simple theoretical value" – something no one, including Saussure, put quite so clearly in print for a long time to come.

Saussure's radical belief that no sound is inherently a consonant or vowel, but that actually any sound can function either way, was never widely accepted, though his conception of the 'phoneme' as a value within the linguistic system, having a psychological existence rather than one based in sound, would in time become the mainstream view. To promote both these ideas he attempted to write a book about phonology in the first half of the 1880s, from which five manuscript notebooks survive. In the third, from 1883, Saussure lists the various ways in which a phoneme can be conceived:

phoneme = <always possibility of a> semiological value
 phoneme = Acoustic oppositions
 [...] Not founded on diversity of sound.
 Delimitation <in the name of semiology> of the phoneme (negative only) <and coming only after the acoustic delimitation> (Saussure 1995: 91).²⁶

The book was abandoned, and none of these ideas would appear in any of Saussure's published works in his lifetime. In retrospect, they were already implicit in Saussure (1879), when he put questions of articulation and acoustics aside in order to focus exclusively on phonemes as signifying units. The third notebook goes on to explore the idea of "value", which he relates to the "acoustico-psychological cycle":

semiotic phonology
 is concerned with <sounds and series of sounds existing in each idiom> inasmuch as they have a value for the idea (acoustico-psychological cycle) (Saussure 1995: 120)²⁷

The fifth notebook contests the Neogrammarian linguist Hermann Osthoff's view that relative inherent sonance of two adjoining sounds determined which would be the vowel in a given primitive Indo-European syllable. Toward the end it offers general reflections as well – again of the sort associated with the "late" rather than the "early" Saussure:

Nevertheless everything in language which is <a> fact of consciousness, that is to say the relationship between the sound and the idea, the semiological value of the phoneme, can and must be studied outside of all historical preoccupation: the study on the same plane of a state of the language is perfectly justified (and <even> necessary although neglected and misunderstood) when it has to do with semiological facts. (ibid., p. 224-225)²⁸

Here we find most of Saussurean linguistics in a single sentence from 1883: the linguistic sign (the relationship between the sound and the idea), semiology, value, the phoneme, the need to study a single *état de langue* outside of historical considerations. Semiological value arose in Saussure's mind directly from the question of what is a consonant and what is a vowel in primitive Indo-European.

²⁶ "phonème = <toujours possibilité d'une> valeur sémiologique / phonème = Oppositions acoustiques / [...] Pas fondé sur diversité du son. / Délimitation <au nom de la sémiologie> du phonème (négative seulement) <et ne venant qu'après la délimitation acoustique>."

²⁷ "phonétique sémiologique : / s'occupe des <sons et des successions de sons existant dans chaque idiome> en tant qu'ayant une valeur pour l'idée (cycle acoustico-psychologique)".

²⁸ "Toutefois tout ce qui dans le langage est <un> fait de conscience, c'est-à-dire le rapport entre le son et l'idée, la valeur sémiologique du phonème, peut et doit s'étudier aussi en dehors de toute préoccupation historique : l'étude sur le même plan d'un état de langue est parfaitement justifiée (et <même> nécessaire quoique négligée et méconnue) quand il s'agit de faits sémiologiques".

4 René de Saussure and *valeur*

At the start of the 1890s value returned to the centre of Saussure's thinking about language. At this time his brother René (1868-1943) was sending him manuscripts from the USA to edit before trying to get them published in the Genevese scientific society journals. The most ambitious of these, a long manuscript entitled "Métagéométrie", included extensive quotations from a book by the German-American John B. Stallo (1823-1900), such as:

Objects are known only through their relations to other objects. They have, and can have, no properties, and their concepts can include no attributes, save these relations, or rather, our mental representations of them. Indeed, an object can not be known or conceived other than as a complex of such relations. (Stallo 1888: 134)

Stallo comments extensively on John Stuart Mill's statement that "All consciousness is of difference". Mill was himself summarising the view of Sir William Hamilton, a philosopher of the previous generation with whom Mill disagreed on most things, though not on this received idea of mid-19th century British psychology. We do not know whether Saussure was aware of it previously, but I suspect that he was, and that his brother's manuscript and Stallo brought a timely reminder rather than a bolt from the blue.

1891 was a turning point in Saussure's life in several regards: he got engaged, left Paris to take up a chair in Geneva, and revived his plans for a book or significant article on general linguistics. His "Double Essence" manuscripts date from this year. The progression of ideas in them was left at such a preliminary state that, rather than treat them as a coherent text, it is more realistic to look at the key points which are introduced and revisited at intervals. One is the idea of value, which again arises in the context of the oppositional nature of phonemes.

The presence of this determinate sound has value only through opposition with the other sounds present; and there we have the first application, rudimentary but already incontestable, of the principle of OPPOSITIONS, or of RECIPROCAL VALUES or of NEGATIVE AND RELATIVE QUANTITIES that create a language state (*état de langue*). (Saussure 2002: 25)²⁹

Even when two phonemes are correlated with meanings, Saussure asserts, their relationship is "still simply their reciprocal *value*. Here one begins to glimpse the identity of *signification* and *value*" (ibid.).³⁰

He will go further: "We establish no serious difference among the terms *value*, *meaning*, *signification*, *function* or *use* of a form, nor even with the *idea* as *content* of a form: these terms are synonymous" (ibid., p. 28).³¹ In his later teaching he will rethink at least part of this terminological collapsing, making *value*, the product of difference, the essential term, the only one that is properly a component of the language system.

René de Saussure returned from America in 1900 and later began working as a *Privatdocent* in mathematics in the University of Geneva. In 1907 he was appointed as founding Director of the International Esperantist Scientific Office there, and in May of that year, during the semester in which Ferdinand was giving his first lectures in general linguistics, René published an article proposing an international auxiliary currency, the

²⁹ "[L]a présence de ce son déterminé n'a de valeur que par l'opposition avec d'autres sons présents ; et c'est là la première application rudimentaire, mais déjà incontestable, du principe des oppositions, ou des valeurs réciproques, ou des quantités négatives et relatives qui créent un état de langue".

³⁰ "toujours simplement leur *valeur* réciproque. C'est ici que l'on commence à entrevoir l'identité de la *signification* et de la *valeur*".

³¹ "Nous n'établissons aucune différence sérieuse entre les termes *valeur*, *sens*, *signification*, *fonction* ou *emploi* d'une forme, ni même avec l'*idée* comme *contenu* d'une forme: ces termes sont synonymes".

spesmilo. At the congress of the French Association for the Advancement of Sciences in Reims in August 1907, the political economics section recommended its adoption, and the association as a whole agreed to it (R. de Saussure 1914: 313). René later recalled that

The idea of a fictive international currency came to me a few years ago (in 1906), while reading Esperanto journals; I noted that on the cover of these journals, written in Esperanto and consequently addressed to men of all countries, the price of the subscription was marked in francs, in shillings, in marks, in dollars and in rubles. I thought then that one could propose to the Esperantists the adoption of a fictive monetary unit, defined by means of the metric system; one could then indicate all the prices in the Esperantist journals by means of a single unit, of which everyone would know the exchange with the unit used in his own country. In this way the use of an international auxiliary currency would spread in tandem with the international auxiliary language. (ibid., pp. 307-308)³²

At the time, the Belgian, French and Swiss franc, Italian lira, Spanish peseta, Greek drachma, Bulgarian lev, Rumanian leu and Serbian dinar were all of identical value, tied to the same fixed amount of gold. This made it seem all the less logical that the coins and notes of each of these countries were not accepted in another. René made clear that he was not proposing to *replace* the national currencies – that would defeat the purpose, because he did not believe that the international unit would be able to keep a unified value under those circumstances.

A universal currency can be compared to a universal language, since a language serves for the exchange of ideas as a currency does for the exchange of goods. A universal language is utopian because it would not take long for it to disintegrate into dialects, as the universal currency would do into different exchange currencies. On the other hand, an international auxiliary language such as Esperanto, which would exist alongside national languages, is a completely reasonable enterprise, since it does not affect the order of things established in each country, and the integrity of such a language would be guaranteed by the very fact that it would serve only for relations with other countries and not in everyday life. (ibid., pp. 306-307)³³

René would not have been surprised by the problems of the Eurozone, though perhaps taken aback by the success of English as an international auxiliary language, given that it is neither politically neutral nor simplified to the degree that Esperanto is. Esperanto was intended to stand outside the history of people, which would take place in their mother tongues. Those languages would evolve along with the cultures and societies they served, while Esperanto stood aloof and unchanging. In his second course of 1908-9, Ferdinand was dubious: if Esperanto was a language, in use by a community, then it was a system of values like any other language and bound to change. Where the Esperantists believed that the logical origins of the language would protect it from change, for Ferdinand the origin of a language is

³² “L’idée de cette monnaie auxiliaire fictive m’est venue il y a quelques années (en 1906), en lisant des journaux espérantistes ; je remarquai que sur la couverture de ces journaux, écrits en Esperanto et s’adressant par conséquent à des hommes de tous pays, le prix de l’abonnement était marqué en francs, en shellings, en marks, en dollars et en roubles. Je pensai alors que l’on pourrait proposer aux espérantistes l’adoption d’une unité monétaire fictive, définie au moyen du système métrique ; on pourrait alors indiquer tous les prix dans les journaux espérantistes au moyen d’une seule unité, dont chacun connaîtrait le rapport avec l’unité employée dans son propre pays. De cette façon l’usage d’une monnaie auxiliaire internationale se répandrait en même temps que celui de la langue auxiliaire internationale”.

³³ “On peut comparer la monnaie universelle à la langue universelle, car une langue sert à l’échange des idées comme une monnaie à l’échange des marchandises. Une langue universelle est utopique parce qu’elle ne tarderait pas à se dissocier en dialectes, comme la monnaie universelle en monnaies de cours différents. Par contre, l’adoption d’une langue auxiliaire internationale, comme l’Esperanto, qui existerait à côté des langues nationales, est une entreprise tout à fait raisonnable, car elle ne touche pas à l’ordre de choses établi dans chaque pays, et l’intégrité d’une telle langue serait garantie par le fait même qu’elle ne servirait que pour les relations avec l’étranger et non pas dans la vie de tous les jours”.

irrelevant to its state at any point in time. This is the view that Bally and Sechehaye incorporated into the *Cours* (Saussure 1916: 113 [²1922: 111]).

But in his third course of 1910-11 Saussure allowed that the fact of Esperanto speakers being scattered rather than constituting a locally coherent community might affect the conditions of transmission. A language is a system of values that is both social and psychological. Each Esperanto speaker takes part in the “collective mind” of the compact community of his or her mother tongue. Esperanto utterances are acts of *parole*, hence individual acts, proceeding from something like a code, not a *langue*. Just as the *spesmilo* has only the currency-exchange function, with the goods-exchange function following indirectly, so with Esperanto: the signifieds that its speakers exchange psychologically for Esperanto signifiers are signifieds of their mother tongues.

5 Concluding remarks

This Cook’s tour through Saussure’s life, from his education to his last lectures on general linguistics, has combined textual and biographical information, always with documentary evidence except where I have allowed myself to speculate about the role of his Calvinist upbringing. That is not something he wrote about, though here too there is ample evidence extending from the curriculum at the schools he attended to the public role he took in the celebrations of Calvin’s quatercentenary in 1909 (Joseph 2012: 558-560). His personal values were anchored in the Calvinist belief in making one’s life useful. During the two decades as professor in this University he worked hard, including as librarian of the Faculty of Arts, receiving in return a salary that, for someone who had to maintain the lifestyle that his family position imposed on him, was effectively an honorarium. The exchange value of his salary, in terms of goods, did not quite cover the family’s butcher bill alone.

In all his voluminous personal correspondence he never complains about this. He perhaps bore in mind lessons he had heard from Dameth about Adam Smith introducing the distinction between “usage value and exchange value”, and how usage value might apply to Robinson Crusoe on his island, but not to value in society. “The moment we leave this novelistic fiction, in order to reason about society, usage value too disappears, absorbed by exchange value” (Dameth 1865: 81 [²1878: 100], cited above). That *did* bother Saussure: the fact that his publications were scant and his students few in number lessened his own exchange value. He was himself the knight who had gone astray. Recall what Dameth said about the British school’s error with regard to the “conditions of materiality and duration”. Saussure’s “pure labours of the mind” would not have endured, had Bally and Sechehaye not altered their conditions of materiality. That in turn gave them an exchange value that over time increased beyond what Saussure might have imagined.

To conclude: value in Saussure has limited value. It is everything in Saussurean linguistics, yet at the same time sits uncomfortably within it, because it is a metaphor and metaphors always have their limits. Yes, everything in language is metaphorical at some level, and value has no ‘literal’ sense, as Dameth was at pains to show. But once Saussure established that a language does not name pre-existing things, but rather that signifier and signified come into existence simultaneously, should he not have softened his long-standing resistance to neologism? It took him until the 19th of May 1911, near the end of his last course in general linguistics, to come out with the words *signifiant* and *signifié*.

He was right to worry about neologism when the signified is not a concept with any real value. But value is itself a case where he sows seeds of misunderstanding by taking an everyday term from the realm of economics, applying it to language, and then saying “Of course its usefulness stops at point *x*”, in this case because when we talk about value we are normally talking about *stuff*, and his whole point is that language is not stuff. Yet if he had created a neologism for the value-like-thing in signs he would have lost that bit that does

transfer and is enlightening, just before it becomes deceptive. A neologism that did not capture people's attention in the first place would have had no effect.

The metaphor had a massive effect, and the more familiar senses of *value* still help us comprehend the nature of linguistic or semiotic value. They then lead us astray into the familiar connection of value with stuff, suggesting that language too is stuff, that signifiers are sounds and signifieds can be pictures of trees, or maybe even actual trees, despite Saussure's clear statements to the contrary. It is time, perhaps, to replace value with a neologism: *semaxia*, perhaps? It has the virtue of not carrying the baggage of preconceived associations. Still, if you ask what *semaxia* means, you had better brace yourself for my answer to contain the v-word.

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